

U.S. Geological Survey To Use Drones To Monitor Wildlife

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GUEST

Mike Hutt, Director, USGS National Unmanned Aircraft System

BY MARIE ANDRUSEWICZ -- It's cheaper than helicopters and it doesn't scare the sheep and deer. The U.S. Geological Survey now [uses drones to track wildlife](#) and is exploring other ways the systems can replace or supplement manned aircraft missions.

"It's a fairly quiet and kind of an earthy-friendly approach to monitoring things we need to monitor," says Mike Hutt, Director of the U.S. Geological Survey National Unmanned Aircraft System.

In Nevada, two upcoming studies will incorporate drones, one for mule deer and one for bighorn sheep. Hutt says that not only are the drones less expensive and [more friendly to the environment](#), they also have applications where safety is a concern.

"There are certain things that unmanned aircraft systems can do that we don't want to use a manned aircraft for," says Hutt. "Flying in mountains, flying at night, flying in smoky conditions."

They're also a lot less expensive than manned aircraft missions. Hutt says the UAS systems that the USGA uses cost a few tens of thousands of dollars.

But what do the wildlife think of the metal creatures hovering in their midst?

"One of the first projects we monitored was sandhill cranes in the San Luis Valley in Colorado. We weren't really sure how the cranes were going to react. But when the cranes went to roost at night we actually flew the system over them, 75 feet over them, and the sandhill cranes didn't even look up," says Hutt. "And we've flown them over larger mammals, wild horses and burrows ... elk, sheep. For the most part, they really don't pay any attention to us."